

Joseph Nicholas and Bruce Myers

Officers' Off-Duty Work Leads to Missing Girl's Body

By Vanessa St. Gerard

On July 11, 2004, 16-year-old Brittney Gregory of Brick Township, N.J., is last seen by her family. The following day, Gregory is reported missing, launching a massive weeks-long search for the young girl. Although a suspect is arrested, the prosecutor's office lacks any strong leads, and the search begins to wane. However, senior correctional officer Joseph Nicholas refuses to give up and on July 27 takes the day off, along with senior correctional officer Bruce Myers, to search for Gregory with K-9 dogs. Looking back, the officers say their actions that day will forever remain in their minds, as their discovery brought bittersweet emotions, but also much-deserved praise for their commitment to bringing closure to a family longing to find the teenager.

"Anybody who's a father would want to know where their child is," said Myers, father of a five-year-old girl. Myers says he did not hesitate when Nicholas, an 18-year member of the New Jersey Department of Corrections K-9 Unit, approached him about helping search for Gregory's body. For the past year, Nicholas had been training Myers, of the Southern State Correctional Facility, and his bloodhound, Tilda; the Gregory case would be the first search for the dog and her handler. Nicholas also requested the aid of state trooper Bryan Trexler of the New Jersey State Police K-9 Unit, with whom Nicholas had worked before.

Nicholas' accomplishments with the DOC in tracking down fleeing inmates had garnered the attention of law enforcement who began seeking his expertise in finding missing persons. Due to his successful work in numerous missing-children cases — including Megan Kanka whose case resulted in the enactment of Megan's Law — Nicholas was called on nearly 10 days into the search to help the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office and other law enforcement with the Gregory

case, but to no avail. "I can't give up on this little girl," Nicholas had thought to himself. "For me to leave Brittney Gregory ... I couldn't do that." So Nicholas continued to search, with pen and pad in hand, taking meticulous notes that he used to compare with those he has kept from his past cases in an attempt to find the missing link that would lead him to Gregory. By this time, investigators had arrested and charged Jack Fuller Jr., 38, with Gregory's murder, but Fuller would not divulge any information regarding the location of the teen's body.

"This is a case I'm not going to lose," Nicholas said he told prosecutor Elliot Morgan. According to Nicholas, even though nearly 1,300 people, ranging from state police officers to civilian volunteers, had gotten involved in the search for Gregory's body, he was convinced he could figure this case out. Sand found in Fuller's car led Nicholas to a location within miles of Fuller's house where there were two large wooded tracts separated by a large sand tract and a power line tower; however, Nicholas had searched this area already, as had the many search teams and "some of the greatest dogs on the East Coast," Myers said. But with evidence directing him and full support from Morgan, along with the DOC, which allowed Nicholas to take the day off to search, Nicholas convened Myers and Trexler to head out one last time to this area.

The morning of July 27, which marked the first involvement in the search for Myers and Trexler, started very early for the three officers. Myers and 7-month-old Tilda, and Trexler with his German shepherd, Taz, met at Nicholas' house at 4 a.m. in preparation for their two-hour drive to Brick Township. The plan was to search two sites — one designated by the prosecutor's office, and the other by the power line tower. With no results from the first site, the officers and the dogs started searching the second site at around 7:45 a.m. By about 9:13 a.m., Tilda

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From left to right: Nicholas, Trexler and Myers

began acting differently and started doing head spins when she approached a sandy patch of soil. "She started doing something I've never seen before," Myers said. Tilda was pulled away, and Taz was directed to the area, where his behavior became noticeably different as well.

When Nicholas approached the area, he says he noticed a 1/8-inch-wide fissure along with dead grass and sand on top of live grass — clear signs of some type of disturbance. "I felt good and scared to death at the same time," said Nicholas, who has two daughters and a son. "My world went crazy." Almost certain that they had found Gregory's grave site, the officers called the authorities, who by 11:59 a.m., unearthed Gregory's unclothed body from the 2-foot-deep grave. "It's the greatest thing and the worst thing I ever did," Myers said, explaining his comfort in helping the girl's family bring closure, but his regret in doing so in such a heartbreaking way.

Fuller has been indicted on first-degree murder and faces a sentence of life without parole. Although the officers have received acclaim and numerous commendations for their work that day, Myers and Nicholas both remain humble. "It wasn't like we were looking to get a prize or just trying to get newspaper clippings," Nicholas said. "I set the whole thing up ... not to be anybody's hero, but because no one's daughter deserves to be left in a hole."

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